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From Victimhood to Liberation: Devi's Struggle for Survival as depicted in

*Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night*

#### Abstract

Githa Hariharan has achieved worldwide fame as one of India's leading fiction writers. She has produced a body of Indian Literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. *Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night* probes into the problems of three women, Mayamma, Sita and Devi at various levels in the patriarchal society. It advocates gender equality and exposes the patriarchal callousness in recognizing women's needs and giving her emotional support. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* brings alive the underworld of Indian women's lives- where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival. This article titled "From Victimhood to Liberation: Devi's Struggle for Survival as depicted in *Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night*" attempts to explore how Devi struggles for her survival in the male dominated society.

Keywords: patriarchal callousness, emotional support , struggle, survival

Indian English Literature is veritably a mirror to the Indian psyche, voicing its hopes and fears, visions and confusions, doubts and certainty. This literature has flourished leaps and bounds especially in the realm of fiction. Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to Indian Literature. Githa Hariharan has achieved worldwide fame as one of India's leading fiction writers. She has produced a body of Indian Literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. Githa Hariharan belongs to the second generation of postcolonial women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair and Shobha De who together created the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries and has had a significant impact.

*Gita Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night* probes into the problems of three women, Mayamma, Sita and Devi at various levels in the patriarchal society. It advocates gender equality and exposes the patriarchal callousness in recognizing women's needs and giving her emotional support. This article titled "From Victimhood to Liberation: Devi's Struggle for Survival as depicted in *Gita Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night*" attempts to explore how Devi struggles for her survival in the male dominated society.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* probes into the problems of three women, Mayamma, Sita and Devi at various levels in the patriarchal society. As a young girl, Devi desired to know the mystery of life. Devi belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family who goes to America to study M.A after her father's death. In America, she leads a totally free life compared to that in India. While returning home, she has to leave behind the memories of Dan, a black American, for a better life in India which her mother promises. Her period of stay in America is like a dream, which is over, and now she is ready to accept the Indian conventional marriage system. Her stay and study at

abroad leave her with experiences and memories totally unsuited to the life that greets her on her return to India.

Devi eroticizes Dan, uses his interest and affection as a shield in the white claustrophobia of an all clean, all American campus. She does not view him as a real person but clearly regulates this relationship to the blurred regions of fantasy. She is aware that her enjoyment of being with Dan is "... necessarily dependant on her inability to conceive of a life with him. Dan was a friend, an experiment for a young woman eager for experience. The possibility of imposing permanence such as marriage-however flexible in transient America- was somehow obscene. (6)

When marriage is suggested by Dan, Devi pretends to be shocked. She is highly incentive in treating him as a fantasy object and plaything. In order to make her only daughter Devi settle down, Sita decides to call her back from America. After coming back to India, Devi realizes that her mother is going to arrange her marriage through Swayamvara. In Indian social set up, marriage is the traditional role assigned to the woman.

Devi is not prepared for her marriage, but as it is the destiny traditionally offered by society and so without hurting her mother's feelings, she accepts the proposal. Initially she confronts some difficulties in making adjustments with day-to-day realities but soon realizes it is not very easy to change the old order of things only because she has returned from a brave new world. Her homecoming sucks her back to traditional family life. From her early childhood, she had seen her mother Sita who "weaves a cocoon, a secure womb that sucks me in and holds me fast to its thick, sticky walls" (13). During summer visits, Devi becomes familiar with god-like heroes and heroines from the stories of a grandmother. At this point, Devi goes back to "when she has fed and stoked the rapidly returning memories of my grandmother's stories of predestined husbands and idyllic marriages". (16)

Sita prepares Devi for her Swayamvara. After meeting five or six perspective bridegrooms, Devi decides to marry Mahesh, a Regional Manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and tooth pastes. Devi after her marriage with Mahesh moves to the residence of Mahesh in Bangalore. Being a manager, Mahesh believes in managing everything in life as he does for his company. For him marriage is just a necessary milestone of life. He expects that everything he does in life must bring to him positive results. He is in grip of his cursory commercial world. Devi is equal to Mahesh in every way, but in practical life, there is no real equality. Devi remains at home having no chance to improve her knowledge. When she wants to study Sanskrit, Mahesh asks, “what will you do with all this highbrow knowledge”? (52)

Mahesh, Devi’s husband does not share business matters with Devi, considering it to be unnecessary. He is totally unaware of her loneliness. When Devi asks him to postpone his business trip, he comments ironically, “‘Why don’t I pray to be born a woman in my next birth?,’ he teased. ‘Then I won’t have to make a living at all.’” (54) Mahesh wants Devi to attend to his father, to manage the house work and to receive his friends well. Like other men in the Indian society, Mahesh also wants his wife to be a proper housewife. ‘Devi,’ he said patiently, his eyes on the page where I had been interrupted, ‘did your mother need books to tell her how to be a wife? I have never met a woman more efficient than your mother.’ (70)

Though Mahesh’s company manufactures detergents, he is unable to pull himself out from emotional squalidness. He is poor manager of emotions; his imperceptible nature could never make him a reliable husband. Mahesh expects that everything he does in life must bring to him positive results. He treats his wife as an object to satisfy his organised sexual urge, which gives rise to an awesome loneliness. Her existence with Mahesh is like living in a dungeon with hardly any breathing space between the two.

Mahesh is unable to provide her stability and security either physical or verbal, she is no longer warm and safe. Mahesh was brought up in a family atmosphere that considers that role of a wife as being confined to the house with non-interference even in the activities and business of the males. As Mahesh works for multinational company, he needs to travel a great deal leaving Devi alone. When Mahesh is on tours, Devi feels “like a child whose summer holiday had slipped away from her when she was not looking”. (50) She has her father-in-law and Mayamma, the housekeeper to keep her company. She seeks solace in the presence of her father-in-law who was a Sanskrit scholar and offers words of wisdom steeped in tradition. He often tells her a few stories of ideal mythical women, virtuosity of womanhood and path of salvation to a woman. She feels that the stories of her grandmother are prelude to the womanhood and stories of Baba help her to lead a proper life.

As Devi finds life very dull and boring with so much of leisure, she seeks Mahesh’s permission to learn Sanskrit. Mahesh is not interested when Devi shows her desire of learning Sanskrit. He just brushes aside her request. When Devi wishes to take a job as a research assistant, he says, “And what will you do when the baby comes?” He says that a woman has much work to do at home as he cannot accept very liberty. In fact, Mahesh seems totally incentive to the possibility of Devi possessing individuality and a personality that needs to express itself in a role away from that of a wife. Mahesh is a complete business person and after many days of marriage, Devi still finds him a stranger. Her wish to play cards with him is mercilessly disapproved by Mahesh. Mahesh never speaks a single affectionate word about Devi, but he admires Tara, a painting teacher’s “boundless energy, her bubbling, infectious enthusiasm.” (56) He adds that she keeps herself busy but has enough time for her children and he has “never seen such well-behaved children before.” (56) All such incidents widen the gaps between them. Mahesh satisfies his

physical desires without paying any attention to Devi's feelings and emotions. His insensitiveness and inability to understand her properly shocks her and gives rise to a feeling of awesome loneliness in her. Mahesh views the role of wife as confined to the house only. He does not even take into account her education and says "This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn't she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want?" (74) Devi's married life proved quite unhappy. Being the wife of a manager of a multinational company, she is provided everything, but she finds something lacking in her. She finds herself in a deep despair and disappointed and feels marriage has been imposed on her. She considers marriage a torture to her which prevents her from improving herself:

I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush,... The games it plays with me are ignominious... The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (54)

Devi is quite disappointed and angry that she is denied her individual freedom and compelled to follow her husband's "self-contained footprints, with clumsy feet that stumble at sharp edges and curves." (84) Mahesh remains indifferent to the feelings of Devi and turns his house a place for parties and playing cards whenever he is present. He entertains his friends and does not care to consider his wife's pleas, feelings and emotions. Devi's urge for strong sense of revenge is manifested in numerous forms. She seeks an escape in her illusions: "I will grow a garden of weeds, those single-minded, wild, common-blooded weeds that plunge their tenacious roots deep, deep into the helpless soil." (58) Mahesh no longer gives physical or verbal satisfaction to Devi. She never feels safe and secure with him. Devi's marital life lacks the colour and excitement that she has expected.



Mahesh fails to develop an affectionate bond with her. Devi wants to adopt a child to which Mahesh is reluctant. Mahesh expects her to bear children. He takes her to the gynecologist to set everything right with the help of sterilized instruments. The syringes and needles have their own language of torture for Devi. She could never become “an efficient receptacle for motherhood.” (TFN 89) Devi’s interest in life is renewed with the arrival of Gopal, a classical singer. Mahesh’s unconcerned attitude brings her closer to Gopal. On one side, she is tired of Mahesh’s questions of her pregnancy and the other side she is moved by the music of Gopal. She finally decides to leave Mahesh and goes away with Gopal. Her initial fascinate of Gopal wanes as he is dedicated only to music just as Mahesh is to his work. The fascination of the new relationship lasts until Devi understands her place in his life. She realized that she was alone “in her isolated corner, an outsider forever on the fringes of a less ambivalent identity” (135); that Gopal was as wedded to his music concerts as Mahesh was to his job and that her presence or absence would make little difference to Gopal. Devi realizes that she should make a choice now probably a snap decision. “Devi knew the time was right; if she did not act now, she would be forever condemned to drift between worlds, a floating island detached from the solidity of the mainland.” (138) Finally Devi returns to her mother Sita.

Devi is the modern feminist. Though she lacks the will to choose and her early decisions are faltering, the readers note a development in her character. Initially, she is easily influenced by societal role exceptions. She quits US and leaves behind Dan because of a sense of filial piety. Then she marries Mahesh as a good daughter should, attempts to be a full time wife and house maker as an Indian Pativarata should. Devi’s relationships with Dan, Mahesh and Gopal are centred around her sexual appeal. Thus, she always seems to be on the run in her endeavour to find some solace. Both Mahesh and Gopal lose Devi because they could not perceive her soul. Though



she comes home from America, infact her homecoming is her final withdrawal from the male world to stay with her mother, Sita. Devi represents the present day intellectual women, who finally confront loneliness and alienation. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* brings alive the underworld of Indian women's lives- where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival. The article thus highlights the pain and tribulation in the life of Devi and her lonely and difficult battle for self-assertion.

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